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Asbestos dump to be covered in Billerica

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A \$960,000 project to cover an abandoned asbestos dump with up to 30 inches of gravel and topsoil will be started next week in Billerica, the US Environmental Protection Agency announced yesterday.

The four-month-long undertaking will include environmental monitoring of a nearby residential neighborhood to learn if hazardous amounts of asbestos fibers, associated with a cancer-like lung disease called asbestiosis, have escaped from the site.

In Billerica last night, Robert Ankstittus, EPA coordinator for the project, told the Superfund Action Committee Coalition and about 25 other interested people that the project should be completed by November if the weather cooperates.

Barbara Morrissey, a Billerica resident and a cardio-pulmonary technician who said she has seen the ravages of asbestosis, apparently voiced the feelings of the majority in attendance saying, "I'm glad the dump is being cleaned up. I have a daughter attending school near the site and my son, too, will be a new student there next month."

The 15-acre landfill within Iron Horse Park, an industrial park, is located approximately 30 miles north of Boston. It was developed

by the Boston and Maine Railroad. The land is now owned by the railroad and the MBTA.

Used by the Johns Manville Company for asbestos disposal into the 1970s, the landfill has become exposed in spots in recent years, and the possibility that asbestos fibers could be blown about is considered a health hazard.

Altogether six spots in the area of Iron Horse Park, four located in the 1300-acre industrial development and two nearby, are being studied by the EPA for what the agency calls remedial action under the EPA's "Superfund" hazardous-waste cleanup program.

EPA environmental engineer Richard T. Leighton, project manager, said the gravel-and-topsoil "cap" to be put over the asbestos dump is meant only "to abate a potential public health and environmental threat" but that "it is not deemed to be the long-term remedial solution."

But, he said, further engineering studies may determine that the cover is the best solution for the site and preferable to excavating and removing the asbestos, as was done last year at eight locations in Nashua and Hudson, N.H., also used by Johns Manville.

The EPA said the work to determine if asbestos fibers are being blown into the air may include some sampling inside homes adjacent to Iron Horse Park.